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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to refute the idea that the best means of helping students learn to write is by "correcting" every error in their writing. The paper provides a guide to an alternative that works and that can relieve teachers of the burden of paper-grading. It hopes that the strategies outlined may make teaching composition "fun and exciting." The paper offers the following suggestions: (1) Teacher as trainer (not proofreader or grader); (2) Teacher as reader; (3) Students as editors and proofreaders; (4) Writing as collaboration; (5) Submit only best work; (6) Writing comes in many packages; (7) Writing communities; (8) Coping with the paper load. Under the eighth suggestion, to help students prepare their papers, the paper outlines the following 6-step process: First Draft: Reading Aloud; Second Draft: Peer Review; Third Draft: First Reading; Fourth Draft: Second Reading; Fifth Draft: Third Reading; and Sixth Draft: Fourth and Final Reading; (9) Learning Journals; and (10) Grading (the portfolio is primary). The paper states that for grading purposes, the portfolio is worth 70 points, the learning journal is worth 10 points, attendance is worth 10 points, readings are worth 10 points, and extra credit is worth up to 10 points. (NKA)

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Six Step Process to Helping Students Produce Quality Writing.

by Richard Damashek

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CS 511 933

"How do we help students discover the forces that make the process of writing self-activating and self-directing—the energies that allow students to proceed under their own power after the teacher-pilot has left the ship?

*Our lives as composition teachers have too often been made grey and drab by a false split between expository prose and creative work. We tend to forget that the writers who taught us what good prose it—George Orwell, James Baldwin, Joan Didion, Lewis Thomas, Adrienne Rich—write with intelligence, passion and imagination...**The secret of great writing teachers... Is their stubborn conviction that their students have an untapped potential of intelligence, feeling and eloquence...**"*

Hans P. Guth. Revitalizing Composition: The Unfinished Agenda

Six Step Process to Helping Students Produce Quality Writing

Richard Damashek, Ph.D.

If you believe that the best means of helping students learn to write is by "correcting" or identifying every error in their writing, read no further. What follows is not only a refutation of that method, but a guide to an alternative that works and that can relieve you of the terrible burden of paper-grading. Moreover, the strategies that follow may even make teaching composition fun and exciting.

For the last twenty-five years, composition teachers have been told by researchers that there is little correlation between "the hunt for errors" and "correctness" in grading student papers and improvement in student writing. Anyone who is not familiar with this evidence should read George Hillocks, Research in Written Composition: New Directions for Teaching (1986), and the NCTE's How to Handle the Paper Load: Classroom Practices in Teaching English 1979-1980. What, then, are we to do when confronted with a student paper that cries out for editing?

To answer that question, we need to change the way we see ourselves in relation to our students as writers and to overhaul our paradigm of our role as teachers of writing. To that end, I offer the following suggestions (most of which can be found in more detail in How to Cope with the Paper Load and other sources):

1. **Teacher as trainer**, not proofreader, editor or grader. The first and most important change we need to undergo is to see ourselves as trainers, not graders. A trainer acts as a coach, not an evaluator. If all we see ourselves doing is evaluating, we miss the opportunity to engage in a productive interaction with our students in the act of writing.

2. **Teacher as reader**. Only read work that students have polished and, then, only for a few minutes until you discover whether the paper is relatively free of surface errors. I preach to my students: "I only want to see something you're proud to turn in."

3. **Students as editors and proofreaders**. Teach students to become their own editors and proofreaders. Have them work together in small groups to proof and edit each others paper. I strongly recommend that students learn to read everything they write aloud. They identify most major errors in this reading. When they fail to detect such an error or problem, I ask them to read the section to me. At that point, they identify the problem themselves. This way, I never have to put a mark on the draft.

4. **Writing as collaboration**. Encourage students to get help. Only schools require writers to work alone. In the real world, they get as much help as they can. Writers know that writing is collaborative.

5. **Submit only best work**: Give students the same chance real writers have: to select their best work for public approval.

6. **Writing comes in many packages.** Unsuspected in 1980 by composition experts was the importance of the computer as a writing tool and for communication. We need to expand the range of writing activities to include Email, web site and home page design, computer generated newsletter writing and student created writing anthologies written with the help of the computer. By encouraging students to write in these modes, we expand their base for "real" writing and give them a window for the new literacy for the 21st century.

7. **Writing communities**. We need to turn our classrooms into writing communities. From the very beginning of the course, students need to organize around specific writing projects for real audiences (not the teacher) and write for those audiences. The aim of the course should be publication of those writings throughout the course (i.e., newsletters, Email) and at the end.

8. **Coping with the paper load**. Along with these paradigm changes, the following series of steps in a multiple revision writing process insures that students produce the best writing they can in the time available.

This process not only frees the instructor from paper-grading overloads, but helps to create a positive and joyful writing climate in the classroom. To train competent writers, I use several forms of writing: 1) formal writing assignments (an assortment of papers including a job letter and resume at one extreme and poetry and a research paper based on Internet research on the other), 2) home page and web site design, newsletters and anthologies, and 3) the Learning Journal for all informal writing. I ask that students submit the formal papers in the best possible form. To help students prepare their papers, I use the following six-step process:

1. Draft #1: Reading aloud. Students are encouraged to read their paper aloud to someone: a classmate, a parent, a boy or girl friend, a cat or goldfish if necessary. The process allows students to uncover problems on their own. The result, Draft #2.

2. Draft #2: Peer Review. Students read draft #2 to each other. Then they exchange papers and read their partner's paper. They suggest changes and exchange papers again. In the process, they use a Peer Review Check List that I have created for them.

3. Draft #3: First Reading. Students submit Draft #3 to the professor for a "reading," not to be graded. While students work on a writing assignment in the Lab, I read drafts that, typically, are full of surface errors. I make a few comments on the paper in the first two paragraphs such as "read aloud," "consult Handbook on comma splices," run "grammar check." I refuse to spend my time ferreting out surface errors that students can fix themselves. The reading takes 1-2 minutes per paper. The student prepares draft #4.

4. Draft #4: Second Reading. Same process as in reading draft #3. The student turns in draft to the professor. Fewer surface errors allow the reader to attend to larger issues: subject, style and presentation, audience and structure. I write comments in the margins, "read aloud," "I cannot make out your organization," "try to write an attention-getting introduction." Frequently, I go over to the student at the computer and show her the problem without putting a mark on the paper. Then I hand it back. Note, I still have not taken home any papers.

5. Draft #5: Third Reading. By this point, the papers are looking almost presentable and I will make editorial suggestions for improvement, never corrections. I still have not given a grade. I only grade the portfolio.

6. Draft: #6: Fourth and Final Reading. The end of drafting, unless the student wants to continue revising. We have run out of time, the semester has ended, and we are all tired of looking at the same material. All drafts go into the portfolio for submission for a grade on the final day of class.

Not all papers require so many drafts. Some only require minor revisions, which students can accomplish in two or three drafts. Occasionally one draft is enough.

What has happened to the paper load? It disappears. Some papers I will read outside class, but typically only to learn whether they are ready for "final" reading. The important point to remember is that you have to train yourself to accept a new paradigm for helping students learn to write.

9. **Learning Journals.** I assign and read Learning Journals, once at mid-semester, and once at the end. By mid-semester, I can help straighten out problems with journal writing and identify models for other students to imitate. Throughout the first eight weeks, I throw out hints: "Now here is something you should record in your Learning Journal. What I am about to tell you may never hear again."

10. **Grading: The portfolio is primary.** I give students the choice of selecting their four best papers from the portfolio for grading, along with all drafts. My aim in grading is to recognize levels of achievement and competence. My students have the chance to produce their best writing at their own pace.

The portfolio may include printouts of student created web sites and home pages, and anthologies and copies of the class newsletter.

For my **grading plan**, I use a 100-point scale:

Portfolio: 70 points for "formal" written assignments submitted in the portfolio (each of the four papers will be 1/4th of that total, a maximum of 18.5 points)

Learning Journal: 10 points for the Learning Journal

Attendance: 10 points for attendance (each absence is a loss of 1 point. Ten or more absences are automatic failure, unless there are extenuating circumstances).

Readings: 10 points for detailed responses to the assigned readings.

Extra credit: up to 10 points for additional readings recorded in detail in the Learning Journal.

The use of the portfolio and the Learning Journal assures me that my students will get plenty of writing practice and opportunity to improve their writing. By adopting the six-step "grading" method, I can encourage them to become serious about their writing, and, also, I do not get bogged down with "grading" student papers. The experience is wonderfully refreshing for both me and my students. An important benefit for them is that they rarely have to wait more than one period to get their papers returned. A major benefit for me is that I rarely take papers home and can enjoy my students' writing. The key to adopting this approach to "grading" (or, as I prefer to say, to helping your students become better writers) is to make the paradigm shift. If you can do that, you are home free.

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